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## Feeling It:Toward Style as Culturally Structured Intuition

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Keith Rhodes

## Feeling It: Toward Style as Culturally Structured Intuition

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A limited mixed-method study revealed that students could alter written style after direct style instruction, but the effect faded quickly. Instead, students reverted to culturally structured intuition to make conscious, contrary choices. Thus, direct instruction in precise forms of style should probably yield to methods that build culturally structured intuition.

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I have been moved to write a serious article about teaching style not because I have great and earth-shaking method to impart, but in some sense because I do not, even after years of study—including the small bit of empirical research at the core of this article. Style, as it turns out, remains as difficult, complex, and ultimately intuitive as most of the rest of writing. I hope, ultimately, to encourage writing teachers to focus more attention on style, basing approaches on what we already know rather than waiting and hoping for some flawless system to materialize. Indeed, by the end of the article I advocate for quite adventurous approaches, well beyond what the original study had contemplated. After all, we should not hold style to any standard different from the standard to which we hold rhetoric itself. We

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should actively seek to teach style as a varied but essential aspect of thinking about writing rhetorically, knowing all the while that doing so presents problems as wicked as those we face in daring to teach audience, exigency, process, *kairos*, and the rest. Meanwhile, as in those areas, we can attend to giving ourselves the best available frame, the most useful suggestions. I hope to help with that much, at least.

To frame further inquiry about teaching style, I propose one central argument: style flows from the writer's intuitive intentions more than

**To frame further inquiry about teaching style, I propose one central argument: style flows from the writer's intuitive intentions more than from any other influence—including any specific methods that we teach.**

from any other influence—including any specific methods that we teach. I am using the term *flow* here in both its clichéd sense as a writing term and its technical psychological sense (Csikszentmihályi), because the two uses really seek after the same thing.

When we think about the style of a work of writing, we think about how the language itself engages readers in the act of reading—a process that, when it works best, completely hides itself, becoming a true flow experience. That is, a reader fully engaged in reading will, in Richard A. Lanham's brilliantly concise terminology, read *through* the language rather than look *at* the style, focused on the experience the language evokes, not its form. Writers often make the epistemological mistake of thinking that their own sense of flow while writing (the words coming easily) will create that valued kind of fully engaged reading. That may work to an extent; certainly, consciously seeking to add fancy stylistic doodads will draw too much attention to looking *at* the style itself, so that dropping any such designs and just writing our thoughts as they occur may well produce text that readers find more fully engaging. Nevertheless, writerly consciousness differs categorically from readerly consciousness for the simple reason that the writer has (however dimly at times), a holistic sense of where the language might be going and its context, while readers build that understanding and context as they go. Even so, I mean for this article to reveal that our students' casual use of writerly flow gets things more than half right—or at least right enough that we should see the cup as half full, building on that intuitive method. Intending to flow while drafting might turn out to be one sturdy bit of advice for producing better style—though we may hope for further and even better advice.

Perhaps even more critically, that central trope of intent needs to be seen in a rich cultural context. Style, far from being the dry, stodgy refuge of the privileged, works best when we view it as a liberatory pursuit. Once again, I use *liberatory* in both its casual sense and the more technical pedagogical sense explained by teacher-scholars such as bell hooks and Paulo Freire. I have argued before that we teach style best when we make it “practically cool and theoretically hip” (Rhodes), but that formulation remained too deeply embedded in a narrative of privilege and disciplinary control. I now argue not only that students urgently need something like a right to engage with their own style, but also that such a vision of teaching style should ground the liberatory goal of supporting students’ rights to their own language. I address this argument last because I assume I first need to ground the basis for giving it a hearing. But in the more linear sense that I hope to make more sensible by using this indirect approach, the potential role of style in a liberatory writing pedagogy founds and generates the best reasons to take interest in better ways for teaching style. We should find that a concern for style connects directly with recent scholarly trends toward translingual writing (see, e.g., A. Suresh Canagarajah), code-meshing (see, e.g., Vershawn Ashanti Young, et al.) and what Peter Elbow calls “vernacular eloquence.” Most likely, style improves when we mix cultural influences adventurously, seeking mainly an engaged connection between writers and readers—whoever they might be.

**Style, far from being the dry, stodgy refuge of the privileged, works best when we view it as a liberatory pursuit.**

### **What Writing Scholars Have (and Have Not) Learned about What Works in Teaching Style**

We have durable knowledge about approaches that improve style—durable enough that it can seem somewhat stale. Robert J. Connors explained this result a generation ago now, in his landmark essay “The Erasure of the Sentence.” As Connors explained in considerable detail, based on research already well aged at the time, style-based methods such as imitation, sentence combining, and generative sentence extension (in the form often called “Christensen rhetoric,” after its inventor, Francis Christensen) all improve the apparent quality of student writing, particularly for first-year students. Importantly, these methods improve over-all impressions of writing, not just impressions of its style. Teachers limit their use of these

methods for a variety of reasons, many understandable. It remains odd, however, that the recent “teaching for transfer” research has done so little to extend the very few approaches to teaching writing that had already demonstrated transferable effect. Connors’s main and hoary critique still applies. Opponents (and, more prominently, ignorers) of these transferable teaching methods seem to see these style-focused practices as having a grammatical taint. But as Connors urged, we can and certainly should consider the sentence and its composition as something quite different from teaching grammar—as these key methods all do.

Connors seemed to kick off a small but enduring movement that has sought to carry out the pedagogical mission of attending to sentences in those other, nongrammatical ways. Most of the researchers who have followed this offbeat path have adopted the ancient and popular term *style* to stand for that distinction between grammatical approaches on the one hand and, on the other hand, looking at sentence composition in other ways (Bacon; Butler; Duncan and Vanguri; Holcomb and Killingsworth; Johnson and Pace; Lanham). A simple perusal of tables of contents for journals in the field, however—as well as for recent landmark books on composition pedagogy (Adler-Kassner and Wardle; Yancey et al.)—reveals that this *style* movement remains small and largely marginalized.

There has still been considerable activity within those margins, but as often happens to marginalized discourse, it tends to be fragmented, a motley mixture of tentative innovation, repackaged old ideas, and pleas for greater understanding and more research. We need a different description for few if any chapters (not excluding my own contributions) in prominent collections on style edited by T. R. Johnson and Tom Pace and by Mike Duncan and Star Medzerian Vanguri. It applies as well to the nevertheless refreshing and useful reframing of the term *style* by Chris Holcomb and M. Jimmie Killingsworth, who define style as making choices among variants within expanding circles of choice, moving from the textual through the social to the cultural arena—but who maintain a strong theory-hope for the very traditional process of moving from technical analysis of language to expert expression (1–5). Ambitious textbooks focused on style come along every so often, generally offering long-familiar old whines in new packaging (citations generously omitted; most likely, many readers have crossed paths with many of these texts as review copies, or on departmental bookshelves where such copies get archived). The few textbooks that draw

more astutely on researched methods, such as the proven advantages of imitation (Hickey; Roper), draw little attention and tend to receive but one printing. Sentence-combining textbooks for college composition, though once more popular, have not been reprinted in many years.

Meanwhile, a robust commercial market generates books on style that remain largely unexamined and unused by scholars and teachers in college composition—and so with effects largely unexplored by serious researchers. Truly innovative work tends to happen on the margins of the margins, such as in journalist Ben Yagoda's *The Sound on the Page*, a thorough study of style as displayed and described by working professional writers, or Rob Pope's *Textual Interventions*, which uses a variety of language transformations nominally toward the end of literary study, even if they might have much promise as approaches to teaching written style. The net result as to style scholarship is a somewhat deceptive image of settled tranquility in the center and irrelevant frivolity on the margins, as if the field knows what it needs to know and has adopted what it needs to adopt—a calm that I hope to trouble.

As I address a bit farther along, recent activity in composition studies has started to stir that pot, connecting usefully with this lineage of style scholarship, albeit from different directions. Style study may be a dam ready to burst. The most current research on style seems ready to break out of its doldrums, invigorated by translingual connections, as well as by large-scale corpus study (Aull; Lancaster). But first I wish to turn to my investigation of students' experiences with more familiar approaches to style before seeking to bridge the seeming gap between the apparently fusty and moribund domain of style and the fresh and happening borderland of translingual practices and of new, potentially more effective ways to construct an expert language for discussing stylistic moves.

### **Learning from a Small and Problematic Study on Teaching Written Style**

In part as a reaction to the marginalized and fragmented status of style scholarship, I joined a research team that sought to generate more information about teaching style with the most promising of direct methods—those of Joseph M. Williams and of Nora Bacon. Working with a small grant (funded by the Conference on College Composition and Communication), Nora Bacon, Star Medzerian Vanguri, and I collaborated to learn more

about whether style could be taught in direct terms, the kinds of terms used for conscious and intentional transfer of knowledge from one setting to another. After all, the known successful approaches all work indirectly. Recent scholarship on the transfer of learning to new settings indicates advantages in using explicit terms for what is called *high-road* transfer rather than relying on more intuitive or *low-road* transfer based on experience and intuition (Yancey et al. 15–18). To generate low-road transfer of style methods, teachers don't really teach much of anything, other than how to perform stylistic exercises. Students using these methods develop their abilities intuitively, from practice. Indeed, what William E. Gruber calls "slavish" recopying (literally just copying the text by hand) and very close stylistic imitation still seem arguably the more effective approaches, a somewhat dispiriting result for scholars—largely people who prefer being able to name ideas, talk about them, and put them to directed use.

There seems to be great hope, at least, that more direct and articulated high-road methods offer students better methods to transfer what they learn about style to new applications. After all, Joseph Williams and his later collaborators have sold many copies of several editions of the work that started out as *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*—among all the many style handbooks and textbooks, the one featuring methods most like the intuitive, low-road approaches that had already proven their worth. Nora Bacon has published three editions of *The Well-Crafted Sentence*, a similarly oriented textbook that opens up a broader stylistic range than Williams's more businesslike focus. But despite their popularity and subjective approval, these and many other style guides that offer direct style instruction have not been tested empirically to any noticeable extent. That does not mean they don't work, at least for some users. I remain quite confident that Williams's and Bacon's advice improved my own writing, and I use that advice regularly in my own revisions. But our field lacks published information showing whether such direct, high-road advice would transfer to later work in measurable ways—as we've long known that intuitive, low-road methods do. Thus, our research team set out to test that idea.

I caution the overly hopeful that the research grant was small, the team's ambitions limited, circumstances for research even more limiting, and the intent mainly preliminary—sowing seeds that perhaps others with greater resources might later be tempted to reap. Perhaps they still may.

I find more compelling, however, the ways in which a pattern of failure emerged in my portion of the study, a pattern so distinct that even such a limited study would seem to argue for going in different directions. As a result of my results, I find it increasingly hard to believe that the field will ever find a method of direct, high-road style instruction that uses specifically descriptive language about language itself. My attempts to teach style that way tell me mainly that while we're busy looking at it that way, something else happens—something more like Kate Ronald's insight that improving style mainly means encouraging "writing where somebody's home" (171).

For my part of our research project, I taught style directly in advanced composition classes and then calculated the results from five student participants—all relatively capable, academically successful writers—in various ways. Students read Williams and Gregory G. Colomb's *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*; I introduced related ideas from Nora Bacon's *The Well-Crafted Sentence*; and we practiced sentence combining and stylistic imitation. I conducted baseline interviews shortly after the course to capture student reports about how they thought about style. Then our research team counted a number of the directly taught features that appeared in student writings from before, during, and after the course. Finally, at the end of the next semester, I conducted second-stage interviews, during which I showed students draft and revised versions of the writing in which they had most successfully used the methods I had taught directly. To see how they would discuss structural changes alone (without any subjective attachment), I also had them evaluate possible changes that I had made to some of their sentences—in both better and worse directions, at least judged by Williams's and Bacon's advice. Using codes developed with my collaborators based on studying these second-stage interviews, I then coded those interviews to find the frequency with which students made comments of different kinds about their stylistic thinking.

In very brief summary, as shown in the accompanying table and chart (Figures 1 and 2), students did learn to use Williams and Colomb's methods to produce active concision, using agents that can take action (on the charts, simplified to "active subjects") as their subjects and using active predicate verbs. For a more complete and exact version of information about sentence usage, see Appendix A. But students used those features fully only right after the direct instruction. They used them less fully even



**This bears repeating: students did not simply regress; they became worse at the very things that had been taught.**

later in that same course. Then, in a later course, they reverted to an even wordier, less active style than they had used before taking my course. This bears repeating: students did not simply regress; they became worse at the very things that had been taught. Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate this result, first numerically and then graphically.

	active subjects	abstract subjects	active verbs	other verbs	T-unit words
Before	46%	47%	60%	40%	17.47
Middle	73%	20%	73%	27%	20.36
Late	59%	30%	61%	37%	17.73
After	42%	57%	56%	44%	19.9

Figure 1. Results from studying the first 20 T-units from student papers.

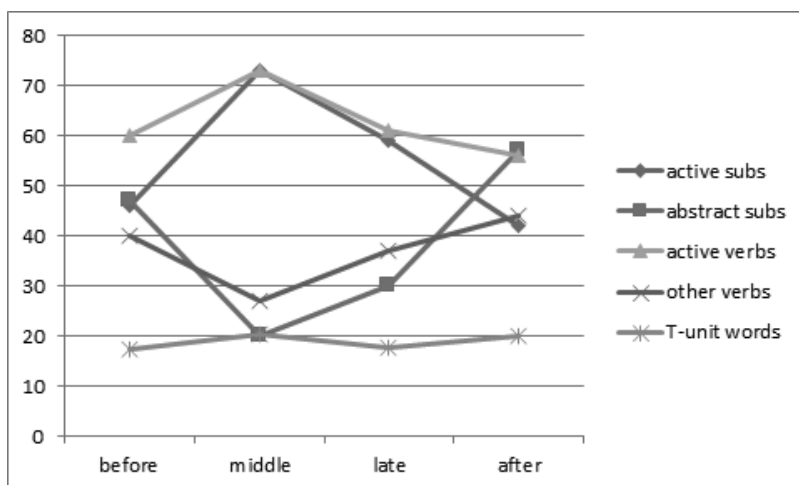


Figure 2. Chart based on the table.

So what had happened to students' thinking? The earlier interviews showed that, even right after the course, students retained none of the already simplified terminology that Williams and Bacon use to discuss style choices. Any retained effects were simply changes in habits or felt sense, expressed in terms students already had available—terms such as *concise*, *clear*, or *formal*. There was no demonstrable high-road, transferable learning about the language for particular features of style. Even when shown changes in language that directly invoked Williams's and Bacon's methods, they did not use Williams's and Bacon's language to describe their judgments about those changes.

At this point, I suppose I might pause to question my teaching techniques. Though I had read and tried to use the transfer-friendly methods advocated by the landmark text on the subject, the National Research Council's *How People Learn*, my understanding was fresh and idiosyncratic. Kathleen Blake Yancey et al. had not yet been published, and I knew of no concise, reliable translation of ideas about transfer into methods for teaching writing. Even so, I had given students varied, experiential, and collaborative opportunities to apply a limited set of key terms, which would seem a workable approach. Yet by the end, students did not use those terms much at all—and when they did, they did not use them for their taught meanings. Any uses that they retained were simply what they'd used those terms to mean before (for example, *passive* meant taking no clear action or failing to take a stand, regardless of verb form; *active* meant describing events in motion, regardless of verb form).

So how were students thinking about their decisions? As the interview coding revealed, they thought mainly in simple terms of voice and tone. Figure 3 shows the nineteen comment categories that we used in coding research across the project, in the order of their use by my students (one student was not available for these interviews; for the full definition of the terms, see Appendix B). The table ranks these categories by total uses and number of users.

The course strongly emphasized concision from the start, probably giving that category an unnatural advantage. The remaining pattern shows that after a strong concern for voice or tone, the main concerns related simply to getting the substantive meaning right. Overtly named style concepts, even in these simpler terms, were lesser concerns.

Uses mentioned	Users mentioning	Description of stylistic choice
31	4	Voice/Tone
27	4	Concision
20	3	Meaning/Accuracy/Precision
15	4	Emphasis/Balance
13	4	Clarity
6	3	Correctness
6	2	I Don't Know (students had no real idea why they had made changes)
4	2	Cohesion/Flow/Smoothness
4	2	Pacing/Sentence Length
4	2	Sound
3	1	Detail/Specificity
3	1	Originality
2	1	Genre/Assignment
2	1	Imitation/Instruction
1	1	Figurative language
1	1	Habit/Formula
1	1	Reader

Figure 3. Table of terms used by students in interviews to describe their stylistic choices.

### The Problem with the Original Hypothesis

Perhaps a much larger study would find different results, but the strong and consistent pattern with this small sample of advanced students probably indicates that such further study might legitimately have a low priority for the field. While at first one might thus despair of the entire project of teaching written style directly, it becomes interesting now to look at the two kinds of data together. For the second-stage interviews, students reviewed assignments that most strongly used the style they had been taught, so clearly they were doing the expected things. They just didn't use the taught terms to think about doing those things.

If we think in terms of what Yancey et al. tell us about teaching for transfer, perhaps our study simply was not using the right key terms by which to organize how students think about style. The fundamental error might well be in conceptualizing expert practice in style as leading from the use of better expert terms about possible forms of language. But the students themselves point us in a different direction. They already seem to make useful sense out of general, felt terms such as *voice*, *tone*, *concision*, *emphasis*, and *balance*. In later contexts, my students have used similarly common terms such as *diction* and *rhythm* and have learned to make significant changes based on thinking loosely about plain, middle, and grand styles. As a result of a fortuitous casual conversation with Douglas Hesse, I've recently found and used Walker Gibson's interesting division of prose styles into *tough*, *sweet*, and *stuffy*—all excesses, in a way, but each capable of moderation by the others. And, in my own classes, I've since modified that topology of felt style into *tough*, *warm*, *stuffy*, and *light*, terms my students have been able to use successfully to differentiate different kinds of styles within a two-dimensional grid. But I suggest that we need to abandon what many of my own favorite influences—Christensen, Williams, Colomb, Bacon—have advocated: teaching inventively simplified new terms for specific pieces of language and then using those terms to help students think about how to craft style. As with grammar, this kind of talk about style in structural terms most likely provides an expert language for critics and analysts of style much more than it serves to guide the vast majority of actual writers while they write.

Furthermore, there may be a more radical pedagogical problem, as indicated by Lanham's concept that style can be viewed as working either *through* or *at* its readers. Lanham expands significantly on that idea in a complex and challenging chapter dauntingly titled "Style/Substance Matrix." I boil the relevant part of that chapter down to saying that an engaging style works in a system of gestalt oscillations, like those images that we can see in two different ways, but in just one way at a time—for instance, the famous two faces/goblet image. The *through* and *at* dimensions of style work as such a gestalt: seen one way, style works *through* us, without our noticing it; seen another way, it comes *at* us, and we see how it does its work. For most purposes, we hope to encourage readers to read *through* our style.

As Lanham argues, writers (and readers) become more fluent in style generally by becoming adept at working and playing with that oscilla-

tion—being willing at times just to let style run through us, at other times to look at how it works. If so, in teaching style we face something trickier than just teaching describable analytic features. Working successfully with style requires opening up and then managing the oscillation between *through* and *at*, between simply trying to engage readers in an ongoing line of thought and, at times, seeking to use stylistic flair to good effect. Sure, those who truly can imagine detailed sentence structure can play the *at* side of the game well; but people who can't do that can still work well on that *at* side of style by using intuition and a loose vocabulary for things

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such as *voice*, *concision*, *balance*, and *diction*. That looser approach corresponds more closely with the experience itself of reading *through*, just letting the style do its work, unnoticed. Indeed, perhaps using a simpler, more readily switched method for

looking *at* their style helps writers feel more empathy for the experience of a reader who mainly wishes to read *through* the text. It could well be that my students used simpler terms about how style feels to help them think affectively about the rhetorical impact of their style on readers, a task that becomes both more laborious and even conceptually different if they must instead resort to more difficult structural terms to do that kind of work.

I have now come to believe that writers need that simpler, felt, *through* attention to their own prose because there's so much more to which writers must also attend. Using simpler, felt terms to guide switching between *through* and *at* thinking helps writers get a better felt sense of the way that readers will read. I see style imagined this way as fitting quite well and systematically with the other rhetorical terms stressed in the teaching for transfer model—*exigency*, *evidence*, *audience*, *discourse communities*, *kairos*, and the like. The rhetorical situation ultimately grounds the oscillation of style and determines the results of style, just as it does for all other aspects of rhetoric.

So style is just another piece of the rhetorical puzzle; but, importantly, it is one, and not responsibly omitted—or left for later, as some sort of dualistic add-on. That rhetorical viewpoint, however, opens up a further problem for style: What style methods do we genuinely need to teach? What results should we want our students to carry forward into future writing challenges? Here I range speculatively beyond what my study alone tells

me, but I hope to stay in close contact with those results, seeking mainly to connect my results with larger discussions about language that, mostly, I trust to go well in the hands of those more fully engaged with them.

### **The New Hypothesis: Teaching Written Style as Culturally Structured Intuition**

In constructing a new hypothesis, first I must face more directly the lingering question whether we should teach written style at all. Perhaps my findings tell us to abandon all hope; it can't be taught, but it will be learned. Just chill.

But at one point my students did learn to change their style, using the named structures for the intended purposes. Indeed, one student actually did not relapse; one student kept using acting characters as subjects and actions as predicate verbs in the "after" writing; that student also kept shifting modifiers from earlier positions in sentences toward the end of sentences, as Williams advocates—as did most other students, the one lasting impression that Williams made on them. True, inside that silver lining the cloud darkens by contrast, because the over-all pattern of super-regression—most students writing even more abstractly than before class—is even more marked if we exclude that anomalous student's results.

Yet even as the effect faded, students subjectively valued what they'd been taught. Student evaluations for the course were unusually strong. On the whole, students had been receptive to the ideas, and their positive view remained even in second-stage interviews, well after course grades had been given, and after these new style ideas had been applied (if contrarily) in later classes. Students claimed to have varied Williams's method to develop more of a personal style, and most said the class seemed to have helped with that, too. Yes, the students did quit thinking in the structural terms they'd been taught, and they did quit using those terms, and even those structures. But the students were telling me something interesting when they talked about seeking to find their own voices even while writing in more abstract and stuffy ways. At bottom, the students seemed to find that a concise, active style did not sound like the person they wanted to be when they performed academic writing more intuitively in the cultural situation of school. Instead, apparently they wanted a more formal, abstract tone as their self-described "personal" voice in the social context of their other classes, and they appreciated having more control over that

voice. Rather than thinking of students' own voices in terms of something Romantic and personal, perhaps we can usefully jumble the word order of the common phrase "their own language," thinking of students *owning* their language—feeling more capable of using voice fluently to fit varied rhetorical situations and social settings.

To conceptualize why students coming to own their voices might be a good result—or at least the start toward methods that will get better results—I've thought of style as working in three rough layers. At the first layer, we write intuitively, simply seeking to make meaning with whatever style comes to us, paying no specific attention to it. And for a great number of people and purposes, that works well enough often enough. Of course, success depends greatly on being socialized already to the particular rhetorical situation; but once that understanding is in place, many writers often need no conscious attention to style just to get by. The second layer consists of felt, sensed advice, advice that uses the kinds of words my students used most often to describe their changes: *voice*, *tone*, *concision*, *accuracy*, *balance*, *emphasis*, and even that dread duo, *clarity* and *flow*. The third layer consists of structural advice, attempts to translate that felt sense into particular forms of words with technical names—as in formal grammar, but also as in advice from Joseph Williams, Nora Bacon, Francis Christensen, and others.

My thesis has become that teachers work on style most effectively at that second layer, and that working at the more technical third layer has benefits mainly to the extent that it adds context and nuance to the kind of felt sense used in the second layer. Third-layer work thus works best not as specific prescription, but simply as exercise and experience with moves that can enrich second-level felt sense. As a deeper warrant, I suspect that students gain from experience with seeing language a certain way, a way that encourages rapid shifts from looking *at* it and *through* it, such that students become interested in how the finer details of the *at* aspect can help generate a better *through* experience. If third-layer ideas help them do that kind of rapid, second-layer shifting more effectively, it sticks—but only if it can be translated intuitively into second-level thinking. Ultimately, to control style we must be ready to abandon systems and feel our way, using general advice.

Thus, while Williams's approach does work systematically well (at least for limited contexts), it might be a bit of a problem that it works al-

together too well in the hands of language experts. Its very accuracy tricks experts into valuing its precepts themselves, which become increasingly and dizzyingly complex as readers move incrementally through the book's announced goals, going from clarity toward grace. For two reasons, that goes badly in practice for many writers. First, Williams's vision of style works best in a narrow rhetorical situation. I take his ethical argument, in the closing chapters of later editions, that academic authors in particular should more readily view themselves as within that situation, but we still do have reasons to choose felt senses, informed by second-layer advice, that lead to styles other than those featuring Williams's exact precepts. Second, and worse, that entire way of thinking might well close off a more useful and robust resort to second-level felt sense as a more reliable guide to the entire, amazingly complex range of culturally informed stylistic decisions that writers could make.

In short, rhetoricians should see style as a practice of culturally structured intuition. At bottom, students will mainly use an intuitive mode when they write as if, in Kate Ronald's sense, they feel at home in their writing. And when they use that method well, it will be a home in which both writer and reader will feel well settled. At risk of overworking the metaphor, we mainly want writers to feel at home in a wider variety of rhetorical places. At first, teachers may be inclined to prioritize students' new academic home-in-progress, where terms such as *clarity*, *flow*, and *balance* might have strong uses, and where the general range of voice runs mainly toward the stuffy, eschewing both the warm and the tough (and certainly the light). My sense is that this academic focus threatens to become a grave mistake, however. Most critically, it misrepresents the entire idea of style: to be able to fit any home, in any way, as needed, and congenially. It asks students to leave behind rather than repurpose any true home styles they bring with them, ones they already use expertly. And it gravely misrepresents the entire range of style that an effective adult rhetor should control.

All of that should sound vaguely familiar, and for good reason. Style most likely works best as just another aspect of rhetoric, working as other aspects do. Just as students need to gain a flexible, expanded sense of genre and audiences, they need to control a wider range of stylistic options—and to know when the ones they already control might actually fit their rhetorical situation. Viewing style that way asks teachers to become rhetorically aware as well—to know when seemingly inappropriate style might instead



be an inventive option, and how to guide a revision of more familiar home styles in new, unfamiliar rhetorical contexts—new, if temporary, homes.

I intend here to borrow from but also to trouble the concept of students' rights to their own—that is, their home—languages. I have not

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noticed that writing teachers and their scholarly allies have had much luck getting the rest of the world to grant that right as such. The truly brilliant scholarly declaration that students should have such a right (Conference on College Composition and Communication) has in practice proven to be a hollow claim

and even a dangerous concept for students to wield—so far. Teachers can, however, value students' styles as genuinely suited to any work students have been assigned to do, usefully inviting students to think about how to bring something of their home languages into new rhetorical places. That is, rather than frame the transaction as a patronizing granting of rights (by those who don't really have the power to grant them), teachers can help students explore the genuine uses of their existing felt sense of style in new contexts.

Writing scholars can also use this frame of practical utility when we explain the benefits of linguistic and cultural expansiveness to broader audiences. Logically at least, that is not a difficult case, as anyone should realize just from observing how effectively broader ranges of cultural styles have been used for purposes such as sales and marketing. Along the way, teachers and scholars will need to develop new and variable language for what I've called "second-level" intuitive thinking, escaping the temptation to lean simply on what works best in limited academic situations. And we very much need to focus on presenting those academic situations as options, as just one among many possible varieties of stylistic circumstances.

Fortunately, all of that connects with movements already afoot. Here at the end, I would like to add a limited, fusty stylistic argument to the already compelling social, ethical, and intellectual arguments for a number of fresher movements—particularly for code-meshing, for developing vernacular eloquence, and for expanding translingual practices. In doing so, I intentionally leave to those with deeper engagement in these practices the extensive, expert arguments and legitimate concerns about the social and

personal effects of those practices. At least from the viewpoint of developing stronger control of style, it should make sense to bring all students into richer contact with the diversity of English dialects.

Canagarajah's introduction to *Literacy as Translingual Practice* explains (among a great many other useful things) why teachers might be able to start working with more varied styles and voices even before having generated a perfected body of theory and practice. As he writes:

Despite the novelty of the term, we mustn't think of the types of competence and practices implied by the term translingual as having merely pedantic or academic interest. The urgency for scholars to address translingual practices in literacy derives from the fact that they are widely practiced in communities and everyday communicative contexts, though ignored or suppressed in classrooms. (2)

As Canagarajah goes on to demonstrate, schools have been complicit in artificially sustaining monolingual practices, doing much to create and sustain an atmosphere in which such practices become artificially disempowering. In the rest of our lives, in that larger world for which we supposedly prepare students, "we are . . . finding that people are bringing certain *dispositions* that favor translingual communication and literacy" (5; emphasis in original). That is, in most other areas, our larger culture willingly negotiates diverse cultural norms. As Canagarajah explains, those other areas include student interactions outside and inside of classrooms, where students already use richly translingual practices. As a result,

[t]eachers don't have to assume that translingual literacy has to be taught afresh to their students. They can tap into the dispositions of their students for such interactions and explore ways to scaffold them for further development. Among students who lack adequate socialization into multilingual and contact zone encounters, teachers may consider working at the level of attitudinal shifts and language awareness to prepare them for such interactions. (5)

Ultimately, "[b]y allowing community practices into the classroom, teachers can study the strategies and dispositions students have already developed elsewhere" (9). Such an approach, by positioning students as experts and teachers as learners, also engages with pedagogical shifts that have a number of other useful advantages—not least of which is demonstrating that we really believe that essential tenet of teaching for transfer, that learners, no matter how expert, must sustain an attitude of "noviceship," always ready

to learn (Yancey et al. 18–20).

Of course, teachers might have other anxieties, such as those indicated by Canagarajah's express mention of relatively privileged students, "students who lack adequate socialization into multilingual and contact zone encounters." What do teachers do about students whose "home" languages seem to correspond closely with privileged dialects? As Peter Elbow explains, that concern partly ignores the important "vernacular" dimension of spoken language, something that writers have always drawn upon for effective style. As Elbow declares, "In short, '*correct writing*' is *no one's mother tongue*" (4; emphasis in original). Or, as he later puts it in what he calls its "negative form," "[O]ur culture of literacy functions as though it were a plot against the spoken voice, the human body, vernacular language, and those without privilege" (6–7). Elbow finds this situation curiously like a conspiracy against fostering comfortable and powerful command of literacy (7). He later extends this only partially playful conspiracy theory:

Indeed, the literate cultures of *all* the upstart [relative to Latin] European national languages—like French, Spanish, and Portuguese (along with English)—forgetting their "illiterate" roots—now have the gall to turn around and try to exclude present-day vernacular spoken languages and call them illiterate and unfit for writing. (342; emphasis in original)

A bit later, Elbow drops his gloves and his humor, directly demonstrating that, as he ultimately concludes, "it takes strong force (usually political, sometimes military) to squash the inevitable human linguistic tendency toward divergence" (372).

As a result, it becomes entirely possible to position all students as having suppressed voices to explore—either their own, internalized ones or ones that they hear around them. Furthermore, we can and should work with a broad range of dialects for practical reasons with widespread benefits. Such work should help all students improve stylistic control and thus the perceived value of their writing. Perhaps more importantly, if particular students are ever to have rights to their home languages, it will make sense to expose a broader range of students to reading, working with, and understanding a broader range of Englishes and dialects. And in turn, helping more students become comfortable with writing and reading a wider range of home languages should enhance communication generally.

As I turn, finally, to practical suggestions, it does make sense to consider Elbow's considerable development of both the rationale for working more narrowly with spoken, vernacular language and his inventive methods. But since that work has already been done, I mainly wish to turn toward options that teachers who still resist that specific argument might find more compatible. For example, one might easily extend Elbow's approaches into playful imitation of dialects near and far, simply to get a sense of how other styles feel and what difference they make. Elbow suggests using Ahmed's anthology *Rotten English*, a collection of culturally disfavored (but clearly powerful) voices, for other purposes, but it would also seem like a natural source for useful imitation exercises of this kind. And since that collection brings in a variety of English dialects from around the world, the language would be unfamiliar and broadening for most of our students, across class lines.

It might also be that more expert hands than mine could work out how to make aggressive use of code-meshing, drawing from the full range of explorations presented in *Other People's English*, by Vershawn Ashanti Young, Rusty Barrett, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, and Kim Brian Lovejoy. Such approaches raise great risks, of course—naïve cultural appropriation or a simplistic essentializing of other voices, among others. From a viewpoint of cultural sensitivity, it can make sense to reserve code-meshing for the specific purpose of helping writers of less privileged dialects develop a blended literacy. Its central feature—"meshing" rather than switching codes, producing texts that blend features of home and privileged dialects—admittedly has much more to offer as a method for helping students view "Standard English as expansive and inclusive, as being able to accommodate and include their culture and dialect" (3). By far the main importance of that pedagogical method for students remains its noted ability to avoid the negative "emotional and racial effects" of code-switching (that is, of essentially segregating home and privileged language, entirely switching codes to use each in its own setting) (5). And certainly perhaps the strongest argument in favor of code-meshing remains that simple racism has much greater effects on students' prospects than whatever dialect they learn to use (5).

Nevertheless, from the narrow perspective of style pedagogy there could be much to gain from widespread use of code-meshing in writing classes, for all students. After all, as Young writes in the "Coda" to *Other*

*People's English*, "[W]e also hope this book will serve as a framework for understanding language in ways that can help anyone reduce language prejudice and promote the power of language as opposed to the codes of power" (156). It may not be a far stretch to connect that goal with what we learn from my style study, too: purported codes of power, as instantiated in specific structural devices, don't really address students' needs nor adapt to their existing practices very well. The most basic method for expanding code-meshing into a broader practice would entail having all students identify the ways in which, as Elbow contends, all of us have at least some differences to negotiate with some mythic, idealized standard form of English. I can also imagine that it serves the larger purposes of code-meshing well if we mess up the power relations among codes, finding ways to ask students with more privileged voices to engage seriously with less privileged dialects and holding them (and ourselves) accountable for understanding that work responsibly. Again, that is a kind of work that could pay large cultural and economic benefits, generating more skilled reading of less privileged dialects by larger audiences, in turn breaking down the artificial cultural dominance of privileged dialects. Meanwhile, it may also be effective and valuable style work for all students who engage with it.

At present, writing teachers from more privileged backgrounds (that is, for related structural reasons, by far most college writing teachers) might best start with modified imitation exercises, where the quality of the result could be referenced to a specific example. Perhaps that method could avoid the dangerous problem of invoking thinly imagined stereotypes. And it might well be prudent in our early going to focus on voices from far corners of English dialect rather than from across the street, for related reasons. But the linguistic skills and cultural sensitivity needed to manage code-meshing from all directions probably should become more prominently demanded of those who claim to have expert preparation as writing teachers. I make that demand knowing well that I am among those who need to do more work or be replaced by those who have done it already.

For now I must leave until later, and largely for others, devising the exact best practices. After all, doing so will require more than just one whole article of its own. But Young et al. have prepared a singularly useful book for supporting that effort, having paired theoretical perspectives with practical approaches to code-meshing in settings ranging from middle school classrooms to college classes. For encouragement in taking

tentative steps on my own, I take to heart Kim Brian Lovejoy's quote from Gerald Graff: "[I]t seems clear that much of the bad writing we receive from students stems from the mistaken picture of 'proper,' academically correct, writing that students form out of their experience of schooling" (141). That is, and particularly as to style, nearly all of our students struggle to develop an alien voice that they think someone wants, rather than simply engaging with all the possible voices that many possible audiences might genuinely want—some that they might already command, others that they might find similarly alien, but useful and compelling.

Nevertheless, it is not too soon to start declaring that it is our job—as teachers of composition, rhetoric, the power of language, and most certainly style—to help students develop a broad, inventive, engaging, and ultimately practical command of the full potential of written Englishes. Lack of perfect methods should not weaken the imperative to find them. We can sense already a groundswell in our profession toward this end, one no longer entirely silent, if not yet fully voiced. For myself, based on what started as a rather modest inquiry into concision and readability, I have arrived at hoping that writing researchers will find translingual practices to be the most interesting and productive approach in the field, and I hope the discipline plans to push that direction strongly, both pedagogically and politically.

That is to say, with conclusory bravado, that teachers of rhetoric and composition might well be most productive and effective if we see ourselves as very prominently teachers of style—so long as we enrich our sense of teaching style to include all of the frighteningly rich and complex linguistic and social practices entailed, approached not as structures to analyze but as intuitions to develop. Writing teachers should largely be those who help students explore the vast options that language presents to us, and doing so in the fully, boldly human terms of identity, culture, and felt sense that all writers must always bring into play to make such choices. I look forward to the promise of more specific and expert language for such descriptions, such as those being developed by Aull, Lancaster, and others. But based on in-depth conversations with students engaged in using such advice, I strongly suspect that, in the end, teachers will benefit most from developing their own sense of comfort with articulating and promoting culturally structured intuition and from speaking about the language itself using intuitive, common terms.

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## Appendix A

### Detailed Results from Studying the First 20 T-units from Student Papers

	Before	Start	Middle	Late	After
<b>No</b>	17.47	15.67	20.36	17.73	19.9
<b>Subs</b>	h: 90 (45%) c: 2 (1%) ab: 94 (47%) frag: 1 (.5%) there: 5 (2.5%) here: 0 it: 8 (4%) tot ex: 13 (6.5%) tot: 200	h: 64 c: 14 ab: 14 frag: 1 there: 2 here: 0 it: 5 tot ex: 7 tot: 100	h: 71 c: 2 ab: 20 frag: 3 there: 2 here: 0 it: 2 tot ex: 4 tot: 100	h: 58 c: 1 ab: 30 frag: 1 there: 4 here: 0 it: 6 tot ex: 10 tot: 100	h: 34 c: 8 ab: 57 frag: 0 there: 1 here: 0 it: 0 tot ex: 0 tot: 100
<b>Verbs</b>	act: 119 (59.5%) pass: 21 (10.5%) be: 60 (30%) frag: 0	act: 62 pass: 2 be: 32 frag: 4*	act: 73 pass: 3 be: 24 frag: 0	act: 61 pass: 4 be: 33 frag: 1	act: 56 pass: 6 be: 38 frag:

\*all in same paragraph of same essay

<b>Abbreviations:</b> h: human h: anthropomorphized animal c: concrete ab: abstract - intangible, conceptual ab: verb phrase acting as subject frag: missing subject there: expletive here: expletive it: expletive	act: active voice (transitive or intransitive) pass: passive voice be: form of "to be" frag: missing verb
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## Appendix B

### Terms Used for Coding Second-Stage Interviews

<b>Active Style</b> Changing verbs from passive or static to active voice Generically seeking to make sentences sound “active”	<i>I guess I just switched from the passive to the active voice.</i>
<b>Clarity</b> Avoiding ambiguity Preventing reader’s confusion or misunderstanding	<i>I didn’t want it to be ambiguous, so I spelled it out.</i> <i>A guy in my workshop said I should explain those.</i>
<b>Cohesion/Flow/Smoothness</b> Seeking consistency or agreement Manipulating sentence length or rhythm to achieve “flow” Adding transitional expressions or signposts	<i>That’s for me; it reminds me where I’m supposed to go next in the paper.</i> <i>It feels like it flows more, like it works better.</i> <i>I wanted to definitely show how these flow together.</i>
<b>Concision</b> Avoiding wordiness or repetition of ideas	<i>Cause y’ know “duties they’re entrusted with,” that’s just their duties, so I don’t think that’s needed.</i> <i>This one is short and to the point.</i>
<b>Context/Location</b> In paragraph or essay	<i>It would depend on the sentences that came before it.</i> <i>I wouldn’t say that. Not in the conclusion.</i>
<b>Correctness</b> Following a grammar rule, whether a real rule or a myth/rule Avoiding error in grammar or punctuation	<i>I don’t like starting sentences with “but.”</i> <i>I think it was probably my third grade teacher? who told me not to do that.</i> <i>I stay away from those, and like semicolons and colons and stuff cause I don’t really know how to use them.</i>
<b>Detail/Specificity</b> Detail or specificity as an end in itself Establishing movement from general to specific	<i>This one adds more detail. I suppose that would be good.</i> <i>I like this one better cause you’re laying it out first and then you give examples.</i>



<b>Emphasis/Balance</b> Choosing forceful or vivid language Stressing or subordinating an idea relative to other ideas in the passage Giving a pair or set of ideas equal weight	<i>That one needed to stand out more.</i> <i>"Horrible" is stronger because it's more vivid.</i> <i>I wanted to show that he thought THIS but I thought THAT, so it was like a pair.</i>
<b>Figurative language</b> Using a favored figure of speech or special effect Violating a "rule" for rhetorical effect Choosing vivid language to create an image Choosing evocative language to suggest an idea rather than spelling it out	<i>I like rhetorical questions; it leaves it up to the reader.</i> <i>I kind of wanted to do a little foreshadowing. I know it's a fragment, but I thought it worked here.</i>
<b>Genre/Assignment</b> Choice is appropriate/inappropriate for genre or assignment Choice is required/prohibited for genre or assignment	<i>I would have made a different choice if this was, like, an argumentative paper.</i> <i>According to the prompt, I don't think making it broader or more inclusive was really necessary.</i> <i>Well the assignment required a, what is that, like a verb? And we had to underline it.</i>
<b>Habit/Formula</b> Following conventional or habitual practice at sentence, paragraph, or essay level (apparently by rote)	<i>I always start my papers with a hook.</i> <i>This is at the top of the paragraph, so it's a telling sentence. First you have the telling sentence and then the showing sentences.</i>
<b>IDK</b> Use this code only if "I don't know" seems genuine, not a verbal tic	<i>I don't know.</i> <i>I don't really have a preference; it doesn't make any difference.</i> <i>I wasn't really thinking about it; it was probably just a subconscious thing.</i>
<b>Imitation/Instruction</b> Imitating the style of an admired writer Using structure or technique covered in class	

<b>Meaning/Accuracy/Precision</b> Providing accurate info Seeking the right shade of meaning or the right degree of certainty Showing relationship among ideas—similarity, contrast, order	<i>I see addiction of any kind as an illness, so that's why I lumped it in with that.</i>  <i>I didn't want to make any assumptions. I just wanted to make sure that I didn't say this is what they thought, exactly, when I don't know what they thought.</i>
<b>Originality</b> Avoiding overused words, phrases, or rhetorical strategies	<i>I don't use set phrases that are really, like, overused, or too cliché.</i>  <i>That would be good, but I have too many questions in this paper.</i>
<b>Pacing/Sentence length</b> Avoiding too much info in one sentence "Spacing" information Avoiding abruptness Longer or shorter sentences as ends in themselves	<i>I didn't want to put it all like one very overwhelming sentence.</i>  <i>I like that one better. It spaces it out a little more.</i>  <i>To me, the sentence just gets too long.</i>
<b>Reader</b> Use this code only if no other code accurately describes the choice Anticipating reader's question Seeking a specific response from reader Accommodating teacher's preferences	<i>Well, Jake who?</i>  <i>I wanted the reader to really stop and think about it.</i>  <i>I think O'Brien would like this one better.</i>
<b>Sound</b> "sounds good" or "sounds weird" with no further explanation Seeking euphony, e.g., avoiding repeated word or series of sibilants	<i>It sounds more mature.</i>  <i>It's just like "sometimes someone someone" so it just sounds like too much.</i>
<b>Voice/Tone</b> Seeking appropriate degree of formality Seeking a <i>specific</i> tone or mood (e.g., sarcasm, lightness, seriousness) Writing authentically, trying to sound natural or like oneself	<i>That just sounds better cause it's, like, a little more formal.</i>  <i>It seems more personal to the families.</i>  <i>Cause obviously I was pretty bitter about all this, so it was supposed to sound sarcastic.</i>

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